

*“Indians, you had life – your white
destroyers only possess things”:
Situating Networks of
Indigeneity in the Anti-Colonial Activism
of Revolutionary Ireland*

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Abstract: *In 1910, Roger Casement embarked on a voyage into the upper Amazon to officially investigate reports of crimes against humanity committed by a British-financed, Peruvian rubber company. The official report of his findings, published as a parliamentary Blue Book, provoked considerable diplomatic reverberations between Washington, Westminster and Rome. It resulted in a significant shift in international attitudes towards indigenous peoples. The journal kept by Casement during his months in the Amazon demonstrates not merely his own scathing interrogation of the distorting constructs of colonial reality, but a complex recognition of indigenous culture rooted in his own conception of “Irishness.” His defense of “savagery” underscored both his critique of “civilization” and the justification of his tragic revolutionary turn. From 1913, he began to connect the fate of the Amazindian with the lot of Connemara “islanders” suffering from an outbreak of typhus. Later, at his treason trial, his own call to transnational resistance is encoded within the logic: “If there be no right of rebellion against a state of things that no savage tribe would endure without resistance, then I am sure that it is a better thing for men to fight and die without right than to live in such a state of things as this.” This article will reveal the identification with “indigeneity” and the configurations of power evident in the transnational discourse on “indigenous peoples” which was integral to the intellectual formation of anti-colonialism in revolutionary Ireland. Through the investigations of Casement, and the establishment of the African Society by the historian Alice Stopford Green, this identification expanded into an explicit recognition of indigenous rights and knowledge and the advocating of a responsibility to defend such rights and knowledge, once independence had been achieved.*

On 24 May 1913 an editorial in the *Irish Times* criticised the British consul, Roger Casement for his comparison of an outbreak of typhus in southwest Connemara with the atrocities committed against the Putumayo Indians of the northwest Amazon. A few days later Casement explained that in making the link he wished to draw attention to “the history of these poverty stricken areas . . . [and] a long record of callousness and cruelty.”¹ This was his opening shot in what can be identified as his third and final campaign on behalf of the oppressed. His work for Connemara relief knowingly fed back to his earlier crusades in the Congo and the Amazon, where Casement had compiled detailed and coherent investigations exposing the new slaveries of the early twentieth century and the social inequity born of colonial rule. This article considers some transnational relations between his investigation in the upper Amazon and how his emerging sense of “Irishness” was informed by his experience of inhumanity on the colonial periphery.

Centuries of intermittent frontier wars in South America were exacerbated by the race for extractive rubber resources in the late nineteenth century. In the space of two decades, from the mid-1890s, there was a violent scramble for the latex-bearing, forested regions of the tropical belt of Africa and South America. This invasion was most intensely felt by the indigenous people living along the basins of the two largest rivers feeding into the Atlantic: the Congo and the Amazon. Market demand for rubber resulted in the violent invasion and transformation of extensive regions of tropical forest, which were quickly turned into slave kingdoms. The crime was identified at the time as an outrage of incalculable proportions. Modernity has done its best to forget this atrocity and part of that process has required the marginalization and reduction of Roger Casement, who was the principal witness and chronicler of this crime.²

By the time of Casement’s arrival in Brazil in 1907 his name was closely connected to efforts to bring about reform of King Leopold II’s administration in the Congo Free State. He was also deeply immersed in different facets of Irish cultural nationalism. “Remember my address is Consulate of Great Britain and Ireland, Santos – not British Consulate . . .” he scribbled to the historian Alice Stopford Green as he arrived to take up his first post.³ Over the next few years his correspondences persistently returned to three issues which he consciously interconnected: Irish sovereignty, reform of the Congo Free State and defense of indigenous rights in South America. Key issues to do with Ireland’s cultural revival, notably self-determination, language, ownership of land, social conditions, identity and discrimination, were now projected into the Brazilian context. In turn, this was reflected back into the crucible of thinking about cosmopolitan nationalism in Ireland. From the intermingling of these issues sprouted new aspirations for international humanity based upon concepts of social justice, racial equality and respect for cultural diversity. By way of his official position, Casement also infused diplomatic circles and those involved in the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines’ Protection Society with an innovative discussion around rights and responsibilities. His investigations into the new slaveries marked the end to another chapter in the history of

anti-slavery and awakened a new age of anti-colonial activism. Ultimately, Casement's reasonable turn towards advanced Irish nationalism and revolutionary socialism, politicised his distinguished consular career in Africa and South America in a manner that continues to provoke discomfiting questions about Ireland's postcolonial status. This also helps to explain why his meaning remains occluded and the interpretation of his role in the 1916 rebellion has been persistently diminished and isolated.

In 1910 Roger Casement was officially selected to investigate rumors of atrocities resulting from the extractive rubber industry and to undertake an investigation in the frontier region of the northwest Amazon, bordering Peru, Colombia and Brazil. The investigation had perceptible continuities with his Congo inquiry which was also concerned with forced labour, land-ownership and resource wars. His first significant contact with a South American indigenous community appears to have occurred in July 1909 during a journey from Rio de Janeiro to the district of Espírito Santo. From this encounter with Botocudos living along the Rio Doce, he drew attention to the contradiction at the heart of Brazilian nationalism, observing that although "the Indian in Brazil is the foundation stone of its national citizenship" and Brazilians were proud to assert their Indian ancestry, they did not care about the fate of the Indians themselves. This position he contrasted with the lot of the Australian "aboriginal" who had merely been the object of "hostility, loathing and contempt," by colonial settlers.⁴

Various recent biographies on Casement have avoided measured analysis of his disparaging comments on the social composition of Brazil and used them to suggest a latent racism underpinning his thinking (Ó'Síochain 2008; Sawyer 1984). Certainly his attitudes must be considered with respect to the racial views of his time and his official position as a foreign office representative, but his own experience of the colonial encounter made him repeatedly re-examine his own thoughts on race and empire, which made him challenge the prejudices and preconceptions. His attitude to race was not fixed but shifted as his knowledge of colonial relations evolved. Several first-hand accounts, from those who knew Casement in Africa, speak of his close relationship with Africans, which was uncharacteristic of most white men (Puleston 1930). What almost all biographical analysis of Casement's race politics has misrecognised is the fact that his critique of Brazil and other South American republics derived from his empathy, respect and idealisation of the indigenous population, who were still under siege from the internal colonisation of South American republics.

From various fragments of undated notes held among his Amazon archive it is evident that before beginning his inquiry Casement had read widely the accounts of previous travellers on the Amazon in order to establish a precedent for his own investigation.⁵ He combed through the works of the naturalist-explorers such as Louis Agassiz, the Baron de Santa-Anna Nery, Richard Spruce and Henry Bates and the naval intelligence officers, Henry Maw and Louis Herndon, to extract references to mistreatment and abuse. By piecing together earlier references he mapped the mistreatment of indigenous Amazonians over a much longer period and then deployed this evidence to build his own case.

Casement's initial brief from foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, was to investigate the plight of almost two hundred Barbadians, British subjects, who had been recruited by the Peruvian Amazon Company in 1903-04 to work as overseers between the "white" chiefs of section, who headed up the rubber companies, and the enslaved Huitotos, Boras, Andokes and Muinanes (the main indigenous groups affected by the company's activities), who were saddled with the slavish tasks of gathering rubber and running the rubber stations. What he achieved during the course of his investigation was a reorientation of this initial brief towards a detailed analysis of the treatment and condition of the different indigenous communities. The final outcome was an exhaustive analysis of colonial relations. The Putumayo atrocities remain indelibly on the official record as the most comprehensive inquiry ever undertaken of the continuing genocide conducted against the Native American, pre-Colombian people in South America. Encoded into this textual and photographic archive is a transnational discourse which deliberately links it to the grand narrative of Ireland's struggle for sovereign independence and the fight for universal social justice.

Casement travelled through the Putumayo regions from late September to mid November 1910. There are ostensibly three different textual versions of this journey and some associated notebooks, which are unavailable, probably lost. By far the longest version is contained in *The Amazon Journal*,⁶ an articulate and in-depth reflective account with thick descriptive analysis of the treatment of the indigenous communities and the systems enabling abuse. It is an authoritative source not merely for understanding the ethnocide lying in the shadow of extractive rubber, but for comprehending the racial politics underlying the structure of colonial reality. The multilayered analysis captures the extent and constitution of the crime and instinctively deconstructs the mechanisms of the system, showing the criminal interdependencies which facilitate the instruments of fear, violence, silence, secrecy and intimidation to subjugate and divide indigenous society. The controlling force of this system was the "white man", equipped with the weapons of modernity and working through a complicit State apparatus empowered to appropriate and re-distribute land without any regard for indigenous rights or life.

Another version, deriving from this account, is contained in the reports he produced for the foreign office and which were eventually published together in the *Blue Book*.⁷ These present a toned down case and edit out much of the systemic analysis and expressions of outrage.⁸ The explicit disclosure of suffering and abuse might be usefully considered in the light of both Thomas Lacquer's "humanitarian narrative" and Patrick Brantlinger's "extinction discourse." On its publication in 1912 the report caused an outburst of public indignation and briefly helped galvanise public sympathy. This is the source which the anthropologist Michael Taussig used in his own reading of the "culture of terror" in the Putumayo. The narrative, however, is weighted more towards the Barbadian's testimony and a comprehensive critique of the political economy of the region.⁹

In the course of his analysis of the "epistemic murk" Taussig referred to how Casement's own identification with the colonial legacy in Ireland had heightened his

sensibilities to the condition of the indigenous population. He drew attention to Casement's "tendency to equate the sufferings of the Irish with those of the Indians and see in both of their preimperialist histories a culture more humane than that of their civilizing overlords." (57) More recently, this analysis has been expanded. Casement's regularly recycled reference to how his insight into suffering in the Congo extended from his capacity to look at this tragedy

with the eyes of another race – of a people once hunted themselves, whose hearts were based on affection as the root principle of contact with their fellow men and whose estimate of life was not of something eternally to be praised at its market 'price'

has provoked excavation of earlier episodes of his life for signs of a latent anti-colonial awareness.¹⁰ While Taussig's interpretation prized open the channels for alternative readings of the Putumayo facts and fictions, he was unaware of the *The Amazon Journal* published a decade after the appearance of his own study.¹¹ This text possesses the emotion, sensibility and feeling, which are largely missing from the official report. It also elaborates more overtly the shared transhistorical space of suffering inhabited by both the indigenous Irish and the indigenous Amazonian.

The beginning of the Putumayo investigation might be traced to a conversation between Casement and a rubber trader, Victor Israel.¹² As they travelled up river together they discussed the extractive rubber industry. The dialogue, as reported by Casement, ended in a stalemate: a realization that the issue ultimately could be reduced to a level of "perception". Israel saw the "Indian" merely in terms of economic value, as part of the property of a land concession. Casement, clearly outraged by this attitude, argued from the high ground of British government policy where "tribal and land rights were recognised" (79). What Israel's position revealed was the centrality of slavery to the system and how, without it, the commercial edifice would collapse. Israel's chilling refusal to extend natural rights to all human life offended Casement's position as both a consular officer and an Irish separatist. The philosophical riddle: "If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound" might be appositely applied.¹³ Casement's inquiry was motivated by a determination to give voice and visibility to the indigenous condition threatened by the juggernaut of modernity and a Peruvian State policy supporting conquest and slavery. Ethnocide becomes historically meaningful only if it is documented and described. Casement's realisation of the need to witness to this moment of social and cultural ethnocide was visibly informed by Alice Stopford Green's controversial study *The Making of Ireland and its Undoing* (1908), which Casement admired and reviewed.¹⁴ At moments he intentionally applied the language of Gaelic Ireland to the Putumayan situation, comparing the *cacique* to "the chieftainship of a clan" (272) and arguing that the "Amazon Indian" was a "Socialist by temperament" (Casement 1912).

Over the following three years Casement very consciously placed the indigenous at the very core of his narrative in an effort to alter perception from the outside and to change the dominant view from within. In his early interviews with various officials and government representatives in Iquitos, he records how the local people were well aware of the desperate cruelties and inequities of the system, but no one was prepared to respond – the Putumayo was “a sealed book.” Gradually, through a process of revelation, testimony and historical recovery, he convinced the other commissioners, then the foreign office, and finally his networks of influence, of the abuse and violence.¹⁵ His decision to bring two Putumayan boys back to England was undertaken with the hope that their presence in the metropolitan centre would awaken minds to the tragedy on the frontier and he briefly entertained the thought of sending one of the boys to Patrick Pearse’s Irish language school, St Enda’s.

A further point of contact between Casement’s investigation and his engagement with cultural nationalism might be understood through his comments on language. After arriving in Iquitos, he searched for a reliable interpreter with extensive knowledge of the various languages spoken by the different communities of the region. He realised that indigenous testimony was vital to any “sincere enquiry” (129).¹⁶ One official criticism of his 1903 report challenged his inclusion of the testimony of young, African girls. In the formal protocols of early twentieth-century diplomacy this contravened the boundaries of both race and gender. In the Putumayo his own reports were based principally on the testimony from the Afro-Caribbean overseers, all of them black and British subjects. But Casement scrupulously scrutinized the word of each witness, cross-checked facts wherever and whenever he could, and followed up all stories in order to establish veracity. Through the cross-examination of the Barbadians he unmasked the hierarchies of violence and oppression structuring the brutalization and the “banalization of evil.” “The system of obtaining rubber under terror by flogging and other illegal punishments must cease, and must cease at once” (130), he wrote. From thereon his efforts were devoted to devising strategies to bring about an end to the terror.

His Irish kinship, which allowed him to look “at this tragedy with the eyes of another race,” produced its own problems and contradictions. This is evident in his approach to one of the most prominent characters in *The Amazon Journal*, Andrés O’Donnell, the section chief at Entre Rios. Before meeting O’Donnell Casement expressed a sense of shame “That an Irish name of valour, truth, courage and high-mindedness should be borne by a Peruvian bandit, whose aim is to persecute these wretched Indians, his ‘fellow citizens,’ to rob them of all they possess, in order to make money from their blood.” (196). Following their initial meeting, Casement confided in his journal that because of O’Donnell’s Irish name he was in some ways better than the other white men involved in the enterprise. He tried to find in O’Donnell’s personality and actions any redeeming characteristics and qualities which would somehow set him apart, such as his ability to speak the indigenous languages. However, as the litany of reports about his crimes become clear, he disowned him as an Irishman. This infers that

his notion of Irish identity was founded not upon racial exclusion but rather on specific qualities and characteristics such as humanity, generosity of spirit and kindness. He comments “if these unhappy, these enormously outraged Indians of the Putumayo, find relief at last from their cruel burden, it shall be through the Irishmen of the earth.” (184).¹⁷ He then lists various individuals under the umbrella of “Irishmen,” notably the foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey and the anti-slavery campaigner, John Harris, ignoring the likelihood that both Grey and Harris would have felt uncomfortable, and quite probably offended by this identification.

If his view of Irish identity was complex, so too was his representation of indigeneity. As he reconstructed the extent and severity of the crime, he was careful to ascribe agency to the “Indians” and not depict them as mere victims. His descriptions gravitated between graphic imagery of the tragedy he was uncovering: sickly and starving bodies and overworked sufferers of the system of terror, (with clear echoes of the Irish famine). This contrasted with an aesthetic and racialised construction of the “noble savage,” to whom physical beauty, strength and resilience were attributed. In the following passage he described Huitoto preparations for a dance:

The naked and painted men with their fonos (called “agafe” in Huitoto) of white bark tightly clothing their loins, their pale bronze figures elaborately and artistically designed in violet-black stains, with bars of red and yellow . . . their diminutive wives, whose tiny but shapely bodies were beautifully painted, and their calves covered with rubber of some kind . . . (235-6)

He repeatedly refers to the “docile” and “gentle” nature of the “Putumayo Indians” as being the principal reason why they have been so easily conquered. This characteristic is later echoed in his speech from the dock, when he defended the non-aggressive nature of the Irish as one reason why its independence should be granted: “Ireland that has wronged no man, that has injured no land, that has sought no dominion over others.”¹⁸ On another level, he was inspired by the story of Katenere, the leader of a brief uprising against the Peruvian Amazon Company. He referred to Katenere as being “‘on his keeping’ – as we once said in Ireland” (338) – transferring the language of Irish resistance into the Amazon context. Elsewhere, he expressed a wish “to arm . . . train . . . and drill them [the Indians] to defend themselves against these ruffians” (310).

The historical parallels scrutinizing indigenous resistance to Spanish and Portuguese conquest then merged into a more overt analysis of Irish resistance to English power. The political essays he began to write in 1911, and which became a potent instrument in the international propaganda war unleashed by Sinn Féin in 1914, referred back to both the Amazon and the cause of indigenous resistance.¹⁹ Through these essays he deconstructed the mechanics of history, examining how strategies of secrecy and falsification enabled some narratives to dominate over others. He consciously contested the triumphalism of imperial historiography, and interrogated notions of progress and civilization as hollow supports for Anglo-Saxon supremacy. His critique of both the

English conquest of Ireland and the Spanish and Portuguese devastation of the indigenous cosmos was intended to destabilise the foundations of western historical legitimacy by offering a counter-narrative of resistance. Mid-way through his Putumayo investigation in 1910 he wrote how

the tragedy of the South American Indian is, I verily believe, the greatest in the world to-day, and certainly it has been the greatest human wrong for well-nigh the last 400 years that history records. (312)

This realization of the “tragedy of the South American Indian” was later on expanded in two undated essays.²⁰ An ethnographic comparison between the African, the North American “Redskin” and the South American “Indian” was woven into a re-evaluation of the historical continuum beginning with the appropriation of territory, and the processes of physical and mental abuse unleashed on the American continent by the 1492 landfall and successive waves of *conquistadores*. This analysis is worthy of more thorough evaluation elsewhere, suffice it to say here that it might be located between a genealogy of European defense of indigenous rights espoused by the Franciscan missionary, Bartolomé de Las Casas, and the Jesuit, Antonio Vieira, and a more overtly radical reading of recent times advocated by intellectuals such as Eduardo Galeano and Ward Churchill.

From his experience of the Putumayo Casement’s attention was drawn to other theatres of oppression. In 1911, in the months building up to the Mexican revolution, he wrote sympathetically in support of the Mexican peasantry struggling to overthrow the tyranny of Porfirio Diaz. In early 1913, while stopping over in Tenerife on his last trip to Africa, he made reference to the destruction of the Guanches – the indigenous inhabitants of the Canary Islands – and explained how their history had been first appropriated and then silenced by the coloniser. By then he had lost belief in the reforming hopes of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines’ Protection Society and he was making his final transformation into a world revolution, realising that the struggle against imperialism required a global solidarity of the oppressed. This view would be echoed in the following decade by Peru’s Jose Mariategui in *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality*: “Humanitarian teachings have not halted or hampered European imperialism, nor have they reformed its methods. The struggle against imperialism now relies only on the solidarity and strength of the liberation movement of the colonial masses.”²¹

To conclude, the Connemara Relief Fund – organised with the help of Alice Stopford Green and the first president of the Irish Free State, Douglas Hyde – was Casement’s way of building an Atlantic solidarity of the oppressed, and once more collapsing the indigenous periphery into the centre. His transnational empathy for indigenous people grounded in his inherent respect for cultural diversity, the sanctity of life and his struggle for the universal values of peace, decency, honesty, justice and reverence for the environment – were aspirations informed through an intermingling of

his engagement with Irish cultural nationalism and his observation of indigenous life on the frontier. In short, he defined the divide between “civilization” and the “Indian” as cultural. This is captured in a reflective comment he made in July 1914, after arriving off the boat into Canada from Scotland, as he took the train from Montreal to New York, exhausted from several months recruiting regiments of Irish Volunteers from across the four provinces. During the journey he reflected on the Native American people, the Mohicans and the six nations who had once roamed across this hunter’s paradise:

Poor Indians, you had life – your white destroyers only possess things. That is the vital distinction I take it between the “savage” and the civilized man. The savage is – the white man has. The one lives and moves to be; the other toils and dies to have. From the purely human point of view the savage has the happier and purer life – doubtless the civilized toiler makes the greater world. It is “civilization” versus the personal joy of life. (Curry 25)

Notes

- 1 Casement’s letter appeared in *Irish Independent*, 20 May 1913, under the title “This Irish Putumayo”; the editorial appeared in *Irish Times*, 24 May 1913. Casement’s reply appeared in the *Irish Independent* of 26 May 1913. For a comprehensive analysis of the Connemara Relief Fund see “‘An Irish Putumayo’: Roger Casement’s Humanitarian Relief Campaign among the Connemara Islanders, 1913-14.” *Irish Economic and Social History*, XXXI (2004): 41-60.
- 2 For the most comprehensive recent account of the Putumayo atrocities see Jordan Goodman, *The Devil and Mr Casement: One Man’s Struggle for Human Rights in South America’s Heart of Darkness*. London: Verso, 2009.
- 3 National Library of Ireland, A. S. Green Papers, 10,464, RC to ASG, 21 September 1906.
- 4 TNA FO 369/198 Roger Casement to Foreign Office, 20 September 1909
- 5 See NLI MS 13087 (23) contains notes and extracts from his readings on the Amazon.
- 6 Angus Mitchell (ed.) *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement* (London: Anaconda Editions & Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1997). All numbers in square brackets refer to page numbers in the *Amazon Journal*.
- 7 Cd. 6266 *Correspondence respecting the treatment of British Colonial Subjects and Native Indians Employed in the Collection of Rubber in the Putumayo district* (July 1912).
- 8 These reports have been published by Angus Mitchell (2003).
- 9 A third version is to be found in the “Black Diary” entries for 1910, which paradigmatically reconfigure the narrative of suffering into an overarching, morally decentered sexual saga. This version functions clandestinely as a counter-narrative to both *The Amazon Journal* and the official reports. See J. Dudgeon, *The Black Diaries* (Belfast: Belfast Press, 2002).
- 10 See Séamas Ó Síochain & Michael O Sullivan (eds), *The Eyes of Another Race: Roger Casement’s Congo Report and the 1903 Diary* (Dublin: University College Dublin, 2003); Margaret O’Callaghan, “‘With the Eyes of Another Race, of a People Once Hunted Themselves’: Casement, Colonialism and a Remembered Past.” M. Daly, ed. *Roger Casement in Irish and World History*. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2005. 46-63; Robert Burroughs, “Imperial Eyes or ‘The Eyes of Another Race’? Roger Casement’s Travels in West Africa,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 37, No. 3, (September 2009): 383-397.

- 11 Taussig (1987) compared Casement to Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* although there are aspects of his story which mirror the role of Marlow. The allure of the Casement-Conrad connection is deepened by Conrad's comparison of Casement to Bartolomé de Las Casas, the author of *A short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1542), whose efforts laid the ground for anti-colonial rule in South America well into the eighteenth century.
- 12 NLI MS 13087 (26/ii) "Notes of a talk with Mr Victor Israel, a trader of Iquitos, on board the SS Huayna when anchored off mouth of Javari on night of August 24 1910, bound for Iquitos." See *Amazon Journal*, 75-81.
- 13 This philosophical riddle is generally attributed to George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*.
- 14 Casement reviewed Green's book in *Freeman's Journal*, 19 December 1908,
- 15 Casement was also conscious of how the Indians themselves perceived the invasion of their territory and there are various instances when he tries to describe their perception of what was happening.
- 16 Although his testimonies were gathered entirely from the Barbadians, Casement diligently noted and incorporated the evidence of the Peruvian investigator Dr Paredes, who made a journey through the region the following year and gathered extensive testimony from indigenous witnesses.
- 17 The quotation continues to list a series of names involved with the case ... "– the Edward Greys, the Harris', the Tyrrells, and even the Hardenburgs and the Whiffens . . ."
- 18 TNA HO 144/1636/311643/33, Rex v. Roger Casement, 226.
- 19 In his essay "The Elsewhere Empire" Casement (Casement 1915) compared the description of the Sipo Matador (Murderer Liana) by the naturalist-explorer, Henry Bates to the workings of the British Empire. See also "The Keeper of the Seas" for comparisons with conditions in Mexico.
- 20 These essays were published in the *Amazon Journal*, 497-505 and *Sir Roger Casement's Heart of Darkness*, 127-140.
- 21 This quotation from Mariategui's chapter on "The problem of the Indian" makes reference to Dora Meyer and the Asociación Pro-Indígena, established in Lima 1912 in response to the Putumayo atrocities.

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